

FREE INDO-CHINA FIGHTS AGAINST TIME

Vietnam's Winding, Rocky Road

PETER SCHMID

OUTSIDE Hué, the old imperial capital of Annam, stand empty palaces each of which encloses the tomb of an emperor. Neither in style nor conception are these edifices native to Annam; their real models exist in Peking, just as the model of Frederick the Great's Sans Souci palace outside Berlin exists in Versailles.

"That's the tragedy of our country," explained the very intelligent caretaker accompanying me on my visit to one of these palatial tombs. "All her expressions are borrowed. A few years ago, when Unesco invited all the nations of the world to list what they considered their highest contribution to world culture, Vietnam sent back a humble and self-humiliating answer: we know of no such contribution on our part. Just like every stone in this wall, our morality and our whole social structure bear the stamp of China. All

our traditional ideas come from Confucius, and our public life was founded on the Chinese mandarin system.

"That system was wonderful because it offered the poorest youth a way to highest office, if he could demonstrate under examination an exceptional knowledge of Chinese literature and elegance in using the traditional flowery phrases. But the mandarin system was frightful, too, because it created a governing class that lacked the confidence engendered by noble birth and was cut off, by its arrogant snobbery towards those below it and servility to those above it, from the mass of people from which it had come. These rigid old Chinese forms were laid on our souls like straitjackets. We aren't Chinese, and their this-worldly, pragmatic outlook left us deeply dissatisfied.

"That was the big chance for the French. The Christian missionaries, who came here first, stilled the Annamites' hunger for a mystic religion, their yearning for a father figure. In the villages the Catholic priest became that. But at the same time France brought us a newer form of alienation from ourselves to replace the Chinese one: Descartes instead of Confucius. 'Our ancestors, the Gauls, ate raw fish,' our children recited in school from French primers. Western individualism, with its anti-authoritarian, critical spirit, broke down the cosmic harmony of Confucianism, which granted the individual no role except that of will-less conformity. Once again this wasn't the clothing our souls yearned for. In the 1920's a wave of suicides swept our young people; it was the protest of the powerless individual against an existence that had become unendurable. Other young men chose revolt, which led them to death and prison; despair was the soil out of which even our fight for freedom sprang. We had only one hope: to be allowed finally to become what we are, no longer to live in a zone of intersection, borrowing alien forms from alien powers."

THE West's recent defeat in Indo-China is far from being a closed chapter. In 1956 a plebiscite will be held in Vietnam to determine its final form of government. But events have not halted meanwhile; rather, as PETER SCHMID shows us here, the situation in free Indo-China deteriorates at an even faster rate than before, as the factions, the cliques, and the sects continue their internecine struggles under the shadow of the looming Communist threat from the Vietminh in the north. Mr. Schmid, a Swiss, is one of the world's outstanding roving correspondents, and this marks his third appearance in COMMENTARY's pages (his first was with "Indonesia Sips the Wine of Independence" in June 1951, his second with "The Germans' Present Conservatism" in November 1953). Born in 1916, he was editor of the famous Zurich *Weltwoche* until 1947, since when he has traveled throughout Europe, all non-Communist Asia, South America, and this country. Mr. Schmid is also the author of several books, the first of which was a study of Georg Büchner, the German dramatist, which appeared in 1940. The present article was translated from the German by Irving Pfefferblit.

IT WAS Annam that furnished the cadres for the national liberation movement in Indo-China. Not as close to China as the Tonkin delta, not as subject to French penetration as Cochin China, in the cultivated, traditionalist atmosphere of the court at Hué the will to live an independent existence was felt more strongly than anywhere else. Pham Van Dong, the foreign minister of the Vietminh; Giap, its commanding general; Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam's Nationalist president—they all come from this area. And today South Annam has become the scene of the most exciting experiment yet to take place in Indo-China's process of self-recollection.

With the loss of the North after Geneva, it is all too easy to forget that the Communists had to make certain concessions in return. Below the 17th Parallel, the coasts and high plateaus of the Annamite mountain country as far south as Nhatrang are emerging into freedom after eight years of Communist occupation. While my colleagues were watching the tragedy of Hanoi, I obtained permission from the Vietnamese general staff in Hué to visit the district of Tam Ky, reoccupied two months ago by the Nationalist army.

Eight years! After eight years Hitler had tamed his Germans enough to risk leading them into war. In eight years boys grow to be young men. How did the young men of Tam Ky receive the representatives of a world they had been taught to hate? Had the seed of Communism taken root in their souls? A remark of Ho Chi Minh's came to my mind. "The Vietnamese people," he wrote in Moscow in 1927, "do not understand what Communism is, and they never will."

THIRTY kilometers south of Tourane was where the old fighting front had begun. It had not been a fixed line. When we were still kilometers away from the Thu Bou River, we saw watchtowers, shot-up bunkers, and troop installations. The bridge over the river had been blown up and a ferry set our jeep down on the other side. After another kilometer, the road became a weed-grown bed of stones that no vehicle could negotiate. My guide was a native newspaperman who knew the area well. He had come over from the Vietminh to the Nationalists in 1952, and before that had toured these same vil-

lages to collect and record folksongs on his lute for the Vietminh.

"With its inferior weapons the Vietminh could never have held up a motorized army along the coast," he told me. "The only way it could try was by destroying and depopulating the whole coastal zone. You'll see what it did in Tam Ky: not one stone is left on another in the old center of town, and it's that way everywhere, in all the towns. Wherever there was a roof that could shelter a Vietnam unit it was blown up. The roads were torn up with picks and shovels, and the inhabitants were deported to the mountains."

Under normal conditions we would have reached Tam Ky in under an hour, but now we were forced to make a long detour. Since the road had proved to be unrepairable, the army had transformed the railroad farther inland into a highway. Even then there were difficulties. Blown-up bridges forced us to jolt our way down to fords that we crossed with the water up to our hub caps. During the rains, when the water rises, all traffic comes to a standstill.

It was uncanny how systematically everything had been destroyed. When, after dozens of kilometers, we regained the old road, our car still bounced around as if on a roller-coaster. Even here, where they could not blow up whole kilometers, the Reds had dug deep ditches across the road between every hamlet and village; these had been only hastily filled in with dirt and debris. We stopped again and again at barriers guarded by lounging soldiers. Our chauffeur would jump out and let them study our passes. Other soldiers were playing with children in front of the houses—as if they had been here on leave for months.

Before 1945, Tam Ky had been a little town of 6,000 people. In 1946 French bombs had destroyed half its houses. Vietminh's scorched-earth tactic had completed this work of destruction in 1947. The first thing we saw was a company barracks rising over the ruins of a pagoda, with the flag of the national Vietnam, three horizontal bars on a gold ground, fluttering above it. All around was a new town inhabited by 8,000 people, who had streamed in from every quarter of the compass and were still streaming in. Houses, or rather huts, were easy to build in these latitudes. The materials could be found in the jungle, and even when you had to

pay to have them transported, it came to no more than 3,000 plasters, or about sixty dollars per house.

The major in command of the three battalions garrisoning Tam Ky had chosen the courtyard of the Catholic church for his headquarters and put his tent up there. The old priest there had remained at his post all through the Vietminh occupation. I tried to talk to him, but he was nearly deaf and had withdrawn into his senility as though it were a fortress. Because he had expected to be liberated by French troops he had covered the walls of his church with moral maxims in French. One of them stuck in my memory as especially apt: "It is harder to rule oneself than others."

But Tam Ky had not been liberated by the old French colonial troops. We had hardly entered Tam Ky when my Vietnamese companion began talking English to me. "The people here are not used to seeing white men any more, and we have to avoid the impression that those who do turn up here are French colonists." There were no French soldiers in the liberated territory, no French flags waved in the wind. At most there were a few Engineering Corps specialists; the Vietnamese needed them, but they had to *steal* through the neighborhood repairing bridges.

THE commandant was an old inhabitant of the district. Major Chau Tran Ngoc came from an old mandarin family of Hué. His grandfather had been a prime minister, and his father, too, had grown old in government service. Ngoc in 1945 had given up his architectural studies and fled to the Vietminh military school in the jungle. Until 1948 he had been commandant in Tam Ky, exactly as he was today, only on the other side. His old familiarity with Tam Ky had made Major Ngoc's task much easier. And every day deserters who had served under him on the other side would stick their heads into his tent: "Do you still remember me, Major?"

In the beginning he had felt himself faced with an almost impossible task. How would these people, who had been so intensively indoctrinated for almost a decade, receive the Nationalist troops? In the first villages these troops were greeted with hostile, closed, anxious faces. The Communists had drummed it into the inhabitants that they

would be overrun by an undisciplined and vindictive horde, and had added the warning that within less than two years they would return, and then all those who had worked with the enemy would be called to strict account. Secret agents had been left behind in every village. Communists who had made themselves conspicuous in official positions were sent to other villages where no one knew about their background, and underground executioner squads had been left behind to dispose of Nationalist collaborators. Moreover, the Reds had put up high white walls in every village before leaving, and covered these with peace doves and the clauses of the Geneva agreement.

In many places disturbances had occurred. In one especially refractory village an agitator had attacked a sentry, screaming, "The Geneva treaty forbids you to use weapons!" He had tried to choke the soldier, who could have shot him down, but merely shook him off. For the Vietnam slogan was "mildness." On the second day of liberation there was already less shyness, on the third day still less. The people of Tam Ky began to show their sympathy openly in spite of the secret death squads. Where they knew of Red agents, they denounced them. Were these agents locked up? No, the Geneva treaty forbade that. They would be summoned to the command post and told: "We know what's up. Watch yourself." Then they would be let loose, and only if they tried to agitate their fellow citizens, in violation of the treaty, were real steps taken against them.

For the time being, little was being changed in the reoccupied territories. The old notables remained in their jobs, including the schoolmasters, who had had to indoctrinate the young under the Vietminh. Civil commissions consisting of men who had fled their villages before the Communist terror were appointed to investigate individual cases and choose new officials where necessary.

The major took me by jeep to a village picturesquely situated in the low foothills near Tam Ky. On the way we saw troops of peasant women streaming down from their hamlets to market at Tam Ky with baskets of fruit over their shoulders. Their burdens gave them a curious waddling walk that Annamite women retain even when not

carrying anything. It was a rich district. On both sides of the road the rice stood high, and here and there we saw groups of laborers bent over their work. Everyone waved at us amiably. It was as if this peaceful existence had been theirs for decades.

CAY COC was a village like countless others, with thatched huts in front of which dozens of half-naked children were playing. We stopped at the command post set up by the garrison, which was a battalion strong. The national flag floated over us in the moist air. I talked to Pham Ty, one of the officials newly installed by Cay Coc's civil commission.

He came from a distinguished family. His father had belonged to the local council of elders, and on his death in 1944 Ty had inherited his position. Then came the Communists. They had spared him at first, because he owned little land and lived by his own efforts. Those with larger holdings—though there were no really big estates near Cay Coc—were the ones who suffered. They had to kneel before the assembled common folk of the village and beg their pardon for the exploitation they or their parents had inflicted on them. Their land was divided up among the have-nots—who included the laziest or most improvident people in the community—and they themselves had been driven from their communal posts. As a tradesman Ty was allowed at first to retain his office and rank, but after a year he shared the fate of the others. Every step he took was spied on, and his freedom of movement was restricted. His business shrank, and he had to support his eight children by working his own land. After liberation the old dignitaries were restored to their posts, and those who had replaced them were demoted. Naturally, these latter still secretly sympathized with the Communists, but they did not amount to more than 30 per cent of the population, perhaps less.

These same elements were anxious about the expropriated property they had acquired and which they had not yet been forced to return. Their anxiety was justified. The old rich and the returning refugees, now again on top, were eager to bring back the good old days and regain their lands. It was a difficult problem if no injustices were to be done. "Provisionally, no decision has been made

yet," Ngoc explained to me, "until the harvest is over. The new owners will have to give part of their crop to the old proprietors. Then Saigon will have to decide what happens to the land itself; after all, the regime there has itself come out for land reform and cannot simply restore the old status quo. Probably we shall take a middle course and give the old proprietors half their land back, even if it brings us the enmity of the have-nots. We cannot leave those who have been loyal to us unrewarded for the sake of those who betrayed us."

"How many Communists did you have in this village?" I asked Ty. "I mean how many left it in order to escape the Nationalist troops?"

"Two," he answered, "and they left their families behind because they knew nothing would happen to them under the Nationalists." "What?" I said in surprise. "You mean that two people were able to terrorize the whole community?" Ty nodded, almost in embarrassment. Two determined men who knew what they wanted had led the whole village around like a flock of sheep!

In the market place the prefect of the district had just arrived with his aides, and called the inhabitants together. They crouched there, old and young, to listen to an important announcement. Their money, all that they had saved under the Vietminh regime, would not be honored by the new authorities. The prefect pressed a few Ho Chi Minh piasters into my hands, hundred- and thousand-piaster notes crudely printed on a kind of toilet paper, with the usual Communist emblems: workers swinging hammers, singing peasants with sickles on their backs marching to work. A child could counterfeit these notes, and indeed enormous quantities of counterfeit Vietminh money were now in circulation. The Communists in the North refused to honor Vietnamese money, though one Bank of Indo-China piaster got thirty-five Vietminh piasters in Hanoi, a hundred and fifty in Tam Ky. The only way the inhabitants of the liberated areas could get rid of this worthless money was to travel south to the district of Binh Dinh, which was still Communist, buy provisions there, and bring them back. For the time being the Communists had no objection to this because they did not want to antagonize people who trusted them to that

extent. Moreover, food was cheaper in their territory, whereas so many people had poured into the country around Tam Ky, many of them utter newcomers, that the price of food had risen considerably there.

Phan Thiep, a man in his forties, was a former high school teacher who spoke exceptionally good French. He, too, had belonged to the Vietminh for a few years and taught school in the jungle. Until the same thing happened to him as to all the others: he found he could no longer stand the iron discipline and the constant spying. "I couldn't breathe any more," he told me. So he had fled to Tourane, taught there for a while, then entered a government school. Now he was acting as an administrative delegate in the newly occupied territory, a post corresponding to that of prefect. Of the one hundred and fifty villages liberated two months before, he had already combed through half and appointed new town councillors. In many villages, he told me, a great many of the Vietminh functionaries were allowed to stay in office because they had supported the Reds not as Communists, but as fighters for national freedom. Today, of course, no one was a Communist.

AT THE time of my visit to South Annam, the Nationalist army was no longer meeting unfriendly glances or passive resistance as it advanced. The people who were the last to be delivered from the Communists greeted it with open arms and demonstrations of sympathy. For the Nationalists brought with them consumer goods, of which there had been a bitter lack under the Communists. Case after case of merchandise was lined up in front of the straw houses of Tam Ky, containing flashlights, needles and thread, soap—and, above all, huge quantities of beer which the Vietminh had condemned as shameful luxury. All this was bringing money into circulation, and prosperity. Every day, a woman storekeeper told me, brought a larger turnover.

Towards evening a company of soldiers played football around a large tent in the square of Tam Ky. This was a so-called propaganda company. These formations had been created only during the past year, and their mission was psychological warfare. This company was commanded by an Adjutant Canh, who told me that he visited five to

six villages a day where he conducted communal discussions. Among the troops under his command were skilled nurses who distributed medicines, and mechanics who helped the peasants make necessary repairs. "Let's have no illusions," Adjutant Canh said to me. "Those who profited from the Communists, the have-nots, still sympathize with them. They offer no resistance—how could they? But they're only waiting for the wind to turn again. The only way we can really get rid of Communism is to outbid their social achievements and offer even the poor a better life."

Captain Giai, who was head of the psychological warfare section of the Vietnam general staff and, in spite of his subordinate rank, one of the most influential officers in the army, had already explained to me his plans for transforming the whole army, now that its combat task was at an end, into one great propaganda battalion. It all sounded very fine, yet I could not suppress certain doubts. Adjutant Canh agreed: "In general, there is too much talk." But it was not only that: at bottom these propagandists had no message.

THE Nationalist regime, for all its talk of social reform, is by its very nature an old regime that must base itself on traditional forces. Its reoccupation of Central Vietnam has been a success precisely because the older forms of society in that region have remained almost untouched by colonial penetration. There, the old village society was a kind of communal social security system that provided for everybody, including the poor, with a minimum ration from community land. And this society has remained largely intact. Communism could attempt to change it only by wanton destruction, and the present return to the old order is to a certain degree the restoration of an organic one.

Things are different in the South, however. In Cochin China colonial enterprise has cleared rice fields and plantations out of swamp and jungle. These new estates belonged to French companies or rich Vietnamese, and here an agrarian proletariat, a revolutionary mass, has been created. In this region Ho Chi Minh, in spite of the Geneva treaty, is still master, and the Vietnamese authorities lead a shadowy existence, for most of the people continue to obey the cells

and secret courts of the Vietminh. And here the observer is made painfully aware of how little the Nationalist regime has to set in place of the prestige of this Vietminh.

Everything it can promise, the Reds can promise with greater conviction and stricter logic. Nationalism? The Nationalists can never rid themselves of a secret inferiority complex, the feeling that at bottom the Vietminh has a more legitimate claim to the prestige of liberator. Today they cling almost despairingly to the argument that the Vietminh has betrayed nationalism because it has reopened the gates to Chinese influence, that age-old arch-enemy. But this charge is hard to sustain in view of the fact that the Nationalists themselves cannot do without the French expeditionary corps and American help.

Nor was I ever able, in talking to deserters from the Vietminh, whether it was my companion on the trip to Tam Ky or the major, to find out exactly what prompted their action. The answer was always a mysterious smile, a muttering about the intolerable discipline and regimentation. It was never that Damascus experience, that moment of positive recognition, that change of heart, which defines the European and American ex-Communist. It was just nicer and easier on the Nationalist side. But that is exactly the weakness of that side: the Vietminh could never have won its victory had it not subjected its followers to such inhuman discipline. One is almost tempted to speak of a counter-offensive of Confucian collectivism against French individualism, of a new version of the old struggle for the Vietnamese soul. To be sure, the Communist variety of Confucianism has jettisoned the old spiritual superstructure and replaced it with a materialist philosophy of history; and it is not the family, but the state, that now requires the sacrifice of the individual. But it demands no less a sacrifice for that.

I could never suppress the feeling, in conversation with those who had come over from the Vietminh, that at bottom their individualism lacked the counterweight of a higher sense of the community. The political scene in Saigon in all its anarchy is an unmistakable symptom of this. Bandits, religious sects with private armies, a rebellious army, the anemic regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem—all factions and parties are so

inextricably involved in mutual hostility as to paralyze themselves for the purposes of constructive political action.

II

ABOUT a hundred kilometers northwest of Saigon, in the plain of Cochin China, an extraordinary mountain rears its truncated conical mass over a green carpet of rice fields and palms through which slow rivers meander. There are no other mountains near it. It is not a volcano, although it looks very much like one. Hundreds of years ago folk-piety accounted for its existence with the Buddhist legend of a "black maiden," and a temple of pilgrimage was raised to her on Nui Ba Den's summit. Today the temple lies in ruins, and no pious foot ventures on the path leading up to it: isolated bands of Vietminh still make the heights unsafe.

But around the feet of Nui Ba Den spreads a paradise, a kingdom of God in the midst of the profane confusion of dismembered Indo-China. And this Garden of Eden is governed by a kind of priestly state with an army that has for years successfully defended the peace of its capital, Tay Minh, which is the Vatican of the new religion of Cao Dai.

As you walk through simple straw-thatched huts towards a large building that rises out of their midst like a peacock in a henyard, you rub your eyes in astonishment. Is it a Buddhist pagoda or a Christian church? It has borrowed from the latter its long ground plan and its division into middle and side aisles, choir, nave, and gallery. But grinning dragons twine around the columns of its portal; the typical Buddhist guardian couple, the grim warrior and the kindly one, flank its doors; the fabled creatures of Oriental mythology—the unicorn, the tortoise, the phoenix, and the dragon again—creep and fly on its roof. And from the choir, inside, gleams the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu. All the religions of the world seem to have a rendezvous here.

"Actually, ours is a Eurasian religion," explains my guide, a tall white-clad priest. "You see, we don't believe in a single true and uniquely sanctifying belief. The Creator has scattered the seeds of truth over the centuries and over the continents of the earth. Jesus or Buddha or Laotse: their message is at bottom only a form of the great divine truth; in their depths all religions coincide."

The new religion was revealed less than thirty years ago. A group of Vietnamese officials of the French administration, whose souls were starving behind their stacks of documents, had joined together to seek metaphysical consolation in spiritualism. At first they had tried table-rapping, but this had proved tedious and a waste of time, so they turned to a quicker and more practical instrument called the "beaked basket." Two men, who had shown gifts as mediums, held this basket upside down with its beak, which projected from its rim like the neck of a violin, resting on a freshly waxed table. The beak began straightway to write characters on the table top with such astonishing speed that those deciphering them could hardly keep up with it. Finally in November 1926, God himself, under the name of Cao Dai, condescended to reveal his presence to the faithful in the combined person of Jesus and Buddha. Thus was Caodaism born.

It is a religion where the living dwell in strange community with the dead. If the dead can make their enduring presence felt in spiritualist séances, why should not the most illustrious among them take part in the founding of this new religion, and even hold its highest offices? None other than the great Chinese poet, Li Tai Po, who lived in the 7th century, became the supernatural Pope of the new religion. His voice joined itself to that of Joan of Arc and—to give the Anglo-Saxon world its share—William Shakespeare. But great spirits of later date, too, appeared in the Caodaist pantheon: Victor Hugo, Sun Yat Sen, and even Clemenceau. The two last are depicted in a painting at the entrance to the basilica, where, together with a locally prominent Buddhist dignitary, they are shown writing the words: "God and Humanity, Love and Justice" on a tablet of the law.

The spirits not only dictated laws for the new religion, but chose its living leader—in doing which they showed themselves suspiciously partial to the mediums who had operated the beaked basket, especially to the most gifted of them, a secretary in the customs administration named Pham Cong Tac. Today he practically rules as Caodaism's leader on earth, though this highest office of all—actually called Pope—is theoretically unoccupied.

In their worldly organization the Caodaists have sedulously copied the Catholic church.

Their hierarchy includes six cardinals, thirty-six archbishops, sixty-eight bishops, and three thousand priests. These numbers are merely theoretical, since the lack of worthy candidates permits only a fraction of these offices to be filled. On the other hand this hierarchy offers intelligent candidates great inducements and the possibility of rapid advancement. From the lowest adepts up to the very peak there are nine stages of perfection, and the nave of the basilica climbs to the choir in nine platforms. Four times a day the gong calls the faithful to mass: at six in the morning, at noon, at six in the evening, and at midnight. Then the dignitaries stride into the basilica dressed in their red, blue, and yellow robes—colors standing for Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism respectively—with those in each stage of the hierarchy wearing their special robes and insignia. On the platform they kneel down in rows in order of rank, and while a chorus of maidens accompanied by a dissonant caterwauling of folk instruments intones a kind of liturgy, they bow to the giant eye of Cao Dai which, from a globe in front of the choir, stares down on the twilit nave. The spectacle is unforgettable, especially at the midnight mass, when the highest dignitaries appear.

Midnight is the hour at which the spirits are questioned. Midnight is also the hour at which the souls of men, rested by their short sleep, are most open to the influence of the spirit world. So the Caodaists never get a whole night's sleep; after mass they spend an hour in meditation.

THE beauty of many of the Caodaist ideas cannot be denied. But it is hard to overlook the absurdities that have crept into this religion of metaphysically-minded bureaucrats. It is even harder to deny the all too human frailties that afflict their leaders; these make many people dismiss their new religion as a swindle. This is unquestionably an error. Among the Caodaist dignitaries are men of an extraordinarily naive purity of soul who live ascetic lives.

By and large, it is less the joys of the flesh than the delights of power, not only spiritual but political, that make the high spiritual offices of Caodaism worth striving for in the eyes of many men. The leaders of this church-state can draw on a considerable amount of tax revenue, have a million and a

half fanatically obedient souls under their command, and a private army of at least fifteen thousand highly disciplined men armed with the most modern light weapons. The dignitaries of the Cao Dai declare they would like to be rid of that worldly instrument, and the sooner the better. It was created in the days of their persecution, with its only purpose to defend the lives and property of the faithful. But, as so often happens, the temptations of power proved stronger than the most holy intentions, and the rulers of Tai Minh have become so entangled in Indo-Chinese politics that today they, together with another religious sect, Hoa Hao, and a former brigand organization, the Binh Xuyen, are among the most essential political factors in South Vietnam. Anxiety over the rulers of the Cao Dai is increased by the fact that the political advice they receive from the spirits has often led them into adventurous courses, and has left the door open to the wildest kind of opportunism.

Their political career began in 1940, when, with the defeat of France in Europe, Indo-Chinese nationalism raised its head, and even the presence of Clemenceau and Victor Hugo among the Caodaist counsellors could not prevent a certain anti-French turn. It went so far that French soldiers occupied the holy city of Tai Minh and His Holiness Pham Cong Tac was shipped off to Madagascar along with a troop of other dignitaries. When the Japanese invaded Indo-China the Caodaists regained their power; then, after the Japanese surrender, the initiative passed to the Vietminh, and they followed Ho Chi Minh until the Vietminh's openly anti-religious attitude forced them, almost against their will, into an alliance with the French.

It is more convenience than genuine friendship that has kept the Caodaists in this alliance up to now, and there is no question but that anything is possible in the future. Should the Communists prove clever and flexible enough to guarantee Tai Minh continued enjoyment of its religious freedom, along with enough administrative autonomy, they may be able at least to neutralize the Caodaists. It is an open secret that Pham Cong Tac has studiously avoided taking too sharp a position against the Communists. An ecclesiastical leader, he likes to say, must always think more about building bridges

than deepening moats. So when Indo-China's hour of decision comes in the all-Vietnamese plebiscite of 1956, some astonishing things may happen—and all, dubious as they may seem, in the name of God.

WHILE the outstanding characteristics of the Caodaists are their glittering cult, their strict hierarchical organization, and a certain philosophical intellectualism, their competitors, the Hoa Hao, are distinguished by rustic fervor and naked simplicity of doctrine. The name of Hoa Hao comes from a little village near the Cambodian border where, in 1939, a half-demented young man proclaimed himself a reincarnation of Buddha come to restore his teachings. Huynh Phu So, son of a wealthy peasant, had remained a sickly child and youth in spite of all the ministrations of local quacks and wonder-workers, until one stormy night in 1939 when he suddenly rose up from his bed in intense nervous excitement and began to utter religious messages. From that time on he enjoyed perfect health.

So's followers, who are on the increase, have no parasitic priesthood, or even so much as a temple to support. His teaching calls only for ethical behavior, austerity, periodic prayer before a house-altar, the observance of certain dietary rules, and complete abstinence from alcohol, opium, and gambling. Besides his religious gifts, the young prophet showed poetic ones by composing a set of hymns and prayers; he also won fame as a healer to whom sick streamed from all over the country; last but not least, he demonstrated skill as a politician who began to make things as difficult for the French administration as his rivals over in Tai Minh did. However, instead of being exiled, he was put in an insane asylum, where he promptly converted his psychiatrist. He too, in 1942, attracted the attention of the Japanese occupation authorities, and with their enthusiastic support he began to create his own army in order to be able to take the country over in the name of religion when the occasion arose. His experience with the Vietminh after the Japanese left was even more instructive than the Caodaists'. The Communists wantonly slaughtered fifteen thousand of his followers, though until then they had worked together, and this atrocity drove the Hoa Hao, too, into partnership

with their former French enemies—especially after April 1947, when So was lured into an ambush and captured by the Reds, and then killed. Their prophet's inglorious end is still kept hidden from the faithful, who believe that he was snatched up to heaven in triumphant splendor and will return some day.

A general—if he can be called that—became the new leader of the Hoa Hao. In his youth Tran Van Soai had been a stoker on a Mekong River steamer, eking out his meager income with occasional piracy. He attained a certain fame in this way and when he brought two thousand of his Hoa Hao over to the French he was rewarded, in spite of his lack of military training and his nonexistent French, with the kepi of a general—and very dignified he looks in it, with his white, pointed chin-beard. Like the Caodists, Soai keeps a headquarters in Saigon from which he spins his political intrigues, and before which, as the symbol of his multiple responsibilities, he flies no less than three flags: the Hoa Hao's, which consists simply of three H's on a white ground, the Vietnamese, and the French. He receives morning visitors in his pajamas, and the interview usually proceeds with the General sitting in dignified silence while his educated adjutant answers all the questions.

The strength of the Hoa Hao lies in the fact that they control one of the richest districts in South Vietnam and receive enormous sums from their monopoly on rice exports. Their weakness is that their million followers are split by the differences between General Soai and the other Hoa Hao generals. Politics here enters the realm of personal whim and its quick changes. Right now the territory controlled by the Hoa Hao bands who are in opposition to Soai is completely outside civil control. Ship traffic along the Mekong has to be organized, as in the days of the Vietminh, in convoys, and the border villages of Cambodia are subject to constant raids.

NEXT to such picturesque, religiously enlightened bandits as the rebellious Hoa Hao, the Binh Xuyen look very drab, being bandits pure and simple, without any special ideology. At the gates of the Chinese city of Cholon, beyond the river thronged with bright junks that is its busy highway, lies a comfortless, unfruitful wasteland whose in-

habitants could never maintain themselves from the products of their own soil. For centuries it has been the custom among the Binh Xuyen to sally out after harvest-time, fall on their richer neighbors, and bring back loot on which to live until the next harvest. When political difficulties began in 1945, they joined the Vietminh, and their flag is still a reminder of this—except that the yellow star floats on a green instead of a red ground, and the red has been relegated to a framelike border. The Binh Xuyen still boast today of their thousand days of undefeated resistance to the French.

That they suddenly changed sides in spite of this is explained by the attempts of their Vietminh allies to undermine their chieftains, especially the most gifted of them, Le Van Vien, through the introduction of political commissars. Finally, luring him with a promise of promotion, they actually attempted to ambush Vien. He escaped as if by a miracle, and in June 1948 went over to the French with his followers. In exchange for some vague promises of loyalty, the French left him in independent control of his district and the city of Cholon.

Vien, aware that the ideological deficiencies of his twelve hundred men left them dangerously exposed to Communist infiltration, now became, in compensation, a fanatical Communist-hunter. In 1950 Saigon shook nightly to bombs planted by Vietminh terrorists. Cholon remained quiet because the Binh Xuyen, well paid by the rich among the Chinese, maintained order there. Finally the French, to pacify Saigon, gave the job of policing it to the Binh Xuyen, who promptly cleaned out the Communist terrorists, and made the sea route and highway to Cap St. Jacques safe too. They were richly rewarded for these services by being given the right to run the big Grand Monde gambling casino in Cholon, which brings them at least 500,000 piasters every night. It is a strange world, Grand Monde. Two stalwarts sit at the entrance and frisk every visitor for weapons. Inside there are row after row of gaming tables, from simple dice to roulette and the passion of the Chinese, mah jong. But the atmosphere is different from a European casino's: Asiatic impassivity reigns even here; one can hardly tell from the mute, closed faces of the gamblers whether one is looking at a winner or a loser. No tense and

anxious despair, no greedy air of triumph.

Another source of income for the Binh Xuyen are the brothels of Cholon, which they "cleaned up" by concentrating them in a new, palatial compound of buildings from whose walls a neon inscription, "House of Joy," shines out into the night. Malicious tongues whisper that the place was built with American money earmarked for a model village.

THE newest and most powerful party to enter this circus of autonomous states within a state is the Vietnamese army, which up to now led only a half-honorable existence under the French high command. The resistance of French military men to the creation of independent Vietnamese divisions on the South Korean model, which the representatives of the U. S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group were pressing for, was dictated not only by the fear that these might slip out of their hands and become an instrument of nationalism; it was also based on past experience with these troops. "The Vietnamese can be an exceptionally good soldier," a French officer told me, "as long as he is fighting on his own soil and defending his own land and family. But anywhere else he's worthless; he deserts the first chance he can get and goes home. The mass desertions in the North after the armistice were not so much due to Communist influence as to the unwillingness of the men to be sent to the South. This is supported by the fact that very few of them deserted with their weapons, as they would have if they had been traitors."

What explains the fact that the Vietminh soldier, on the other hand, is such an outstanding fighter? Have the Communists succeeded in replacing the loyalty to ancestors and family with a higher loyalty to the nation, or is this courage simply the result of terroristic discipline? Unquestionably psychological motives play an essential role. Captain Giai, the above-mentioned chief of the Vietnamese psychological warfare section, gave me a very candid explanation. "We have never rid ourselves of a secret guilt-complex," he told me, "the complex of fighting on the side of the colonial power against the army of liberation. Even when we could no longer tolerate its Communist leadership and found it necessary to take up arms

against them, the feeling that we were acting almost treasonably never left us." Consequently, the Vietnamese officer is a wholly different type from the Vietminh kind. The latter is sure of himself, steeled with success, while the first still seems to wear the leading-strings of colonial dependence. "They seem to be frightened of their troops," the French officer I have already mentioned told me. "They are afraid to command properly, and they compensate for this insecurity by a tendency to bluster."

Today the tune in MAAG headquarters is a little different from what it was a few months ago. "We have no objections to the French training methods," General O'Daniel told me. "Nor do I believe that being led by French officers affects the morale of Vietnamese troops. A soldier is used to obeying his superiors, regardless of nationality—provided he has confidence in their leadership." For the rest, American intervention is received with mixed feelings even by the Vietnamese army. Many of its higher officers have gone to French schools, some of them even through St. Cyr, and have absorbed French military tradition. For this reason MAAG's role has remained rather academic to this day, and only recently has it found a positive field of action in the evacuation of refugees from the North.

General Nguyen Van Hinh, whose conflict with President Ngo Dinh Diem has brought him into prominence, is typical of the Vietnamese army in this respect. The son of the energetic pro-French ex-President, Nguyen Van Tam, he lived in France from the age of eighteen to thirty-three, and is now married to a Frenchwoman. He is a handsome young bohemian whom one could imagine more easily in Montparnasse than on the battlefields of Indo-China. This does not mean he is not personally brave. He fought courageously during the Second World War in the French and later the American air force, and was decorated several times. Nevertheless, his personality seems too soft for military leadership, too human and obliging.

His political ideas are vaguely progressive. The program he has worked out with a group of other officers leans heavily on the socialism of the Burmese Premier, U Nu, with whom he has personal contacts. It contemplates such contradictory goals as the na-

tionalization of basic industries and the attraction of foreign capital. One cannot avoid the impression that, especially among the younger officers of the Vietnamese army, there exists a violent urge to do something without knowing exactly what. They seem obsessed by a feeling that their time is running out. "Only five hundred more days to the plebiscite that will decide the fate of South Vietnam," they say almost mechanically. "We must act, and here we have a regime that does nothing." It is this impatience which lies behind the army's toying with the idea of a *coup*.

ACTUALLY, President Ngo Dinh Diem, whom the world, and especially the United States, greeted as the savior of his country in June 1954, has met very few of the expectations placed in him. One thing cannot be denied him: intellectually, he is upright and incorruptible. But his rigid clinging to principle has made his relation to his country's whole struggle for freedom a somewhat sulking one. It will not allow him to link himself with any party. In 1936 he resigned as Minister of the Interior at the court in Hué because Emperor Bao Dai would not approve his plans for reform. In 1945 he refused to work with the Japanese. He spurned Ho Chi Minh in 1946 and the French in 1947, rejecting Bao Dai's attempts to get his collaboration. Too brave and virtuous to have anything to do with the compromises demanded by politics, especially in a country as unstable as Vietnam, Diem had remained, until his hour finally struck in 1954, "virgin pure."

But what was needed to dominate the complicated political situation in Vietnam was a shrewd politician, a sublimated gangster who knew every trick of his opponents and how to circumvent them. Diem, the paragon of virtue, with his puritan backbone, mobilized every political power in the country against him in the first weeks of his regime by trying to rap their knuckles like a schoolmaster. Soon he found himself supported only by an unimportant group of Catholic Vietnamese grouped around his brother, Ngo Dinh Nu, and his own paltry Movement of National Union for Independence and Peace. The country slipped through his fingers like sand, and since General Le Van Vien and his Binh Xuyen control the

Saigon police, it is no exaggeration to say, that today the President's power ends at the gates of his governmental palace.

Meanwhile he has one prop to sustain him, the United States. "No Puppet Premier," the American press announced triumphantly, and it is true that this rabid enemy of the French is not a man to bend before others. But he bent all the more deeply before American influence when his conflict with the army came to an open break in the middle of September, and that influence has remained literally his sole support.

The whole crisis between Diem and the army has been steeped from the very beginning in a kind of comic-opera atmosphere from which nothing serious could emerge. "I only had to lift my telephone," Hinh told me when I visited him, "and the *coup d'état* would have been over. Nothing could have opposed the army. But the Americans let me know that if that happened, dollar help would be cut off. That would not matter to the military; if necessary, we soldiers could go barefoot and eat rice. But the country cannot survive without American help. We would only have played into the Viets' hands with a revolt."

I went with Captain Giai one morning to visit Colonel Lansdale, who, with the official representatives of American policy, General O'Daniel and Ambassador Donald Heath, fronting for him plays something of the role of a "gray eminence" as President Diem's intimate adviser. "I have just seen the President," he told Giai. "He outlined a very practicable program to me which he cannot begin because of the hostility of the army. We are faced with a situation in which both parties reproach each other with inactivity and incompetence and both hinder each other from doing anything. We are therefore of the opinion that the President and the army, since objectively they are closer to each other than either will admit, must find a *modus vivendi* and a way of working together."

It was American influence that eased the acute crisis at the beginning of October by luring both the Hoa Hao and the Cao daists out of their opposition, in which they had been siding with the army, and persuading them to enter the government. This maneuver, according to rumors in the political circles of Saigon, cost the American taxpayer

several million piasters that went into the coffers of both sects. In any case it brought about a kind of temporary political balance which serves only to continue the paralysis of the country and permit the crisis between the civil regime and the army to drag on.

MEANWHILE the army radio station, which the regime has tried vainly to bring under its control, continues its feud with the latter, sounding all the more ominous because the regime has completely muzzled criticism of itself in the press. This censorship eclipses anything I have seen even under outright fascist dictatorships. It censors absolutely everything, even advertisements. It hands newspapers their leading articles and requires that they be prominently featured without any indication that they are officially produced. General Hinh's press conferences are simply suppressed *in toto*; in fact, even the press conferences of cabinet members sometimes appear with blank spaces. Finally, because of the bad impression, even the blanks were forbidden, and newspapers were forced to reset whole pages. The new Minister of Information, Thai, a Caodaist, announced when he took office that he would restore complete freedom of the press, but began his official duties by suspending the two largest newspapers in Saigon, one of them permanently, because it had dared to lay a front-page picture of General Hinh before the censor.

One can imagine the mood of newspaper editors in free Indo-China. Their circulation has dropped heavily because nobody wants to read a muzzled press. On the other hand, they are beginning to wonder, more and more, where exactly the democratic legitimacy of Diem's regime, as compared to the tyranny of the Vietminh, can still be found. And they are taking more and more care not to write against the Communists, on whose mercy they expect their fate sooner or later to depend. Not only that: all the thinking,

not only of the editorial offices, but of all the intellectuals of Saigon, is nourished in essence by a latent but omnipresent whispering campaign carried on by the Communists. Take for example Nguyen Thi Cam Van, an enchanting twenty-two-year-old Vietnamese girl, the daughter of a rich family, who rides around in nothing but Cadillacs. Her father is director of the above-mentioned suspended newspaper; in order to reduce his loss he bought up an unimportant competing journal and put his old staff to work on it, with his daughter acting as editor. She has become a famous reporter, a kind of Vietnamese Marguerite Higgins, and during the fighting visited the front at Dienbienphu and other critical places. She is certainly no Communist.

"Do you like the Americans?" I asked her. A decided no. "They want war," she added, "and their protection is only a pretext. But we have had enough of war, we want peace at any price." "Even at the price of Communist rule? What would happen to you if the Vietminh were to take power in the South, too?" "They would take everything away from us, suspend the paper and confiscate the presses. I don't know if I'll run away because of that. I'm a fatalist, I suppose; this is my country and I'll share its fate." "But then why don't you at least try to fight Communism with every means to avoid that fate?" "The Vietminh are not Communists. Just the way the Chinese regime is not Communist, but a coalition government under Communist leadership. That's exactly the way it will be with us."

What sophistry! But Cam Van was not the only person I heard argue like that in Saigon. People are already preparing themselves inwardly for the Communist victory. They wait, fascinated, like the bird before the snake that will devour it one day. South Vietnam seems already a corpse, and the birds that fly over it are, without knowing it, vultures.